

A study on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on Nigerian seafarers

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Abstract: There is no doubt that Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted negatively on global shipping and the effects are also being felt in the Nigerian shipping industry. Through review of extant literature, the effects of COVID-19 on Nigerian shipping industry with specific focus on port operations and Nigerian seafarers were examined. The findings revealed that lock down of the economy and restriction of movements in Nigeria presented a challenging situation for stakeholders in the shipping industry to fulfill their contractual obligations, import and export operations are hampered, Nigerian seafarers are mentally and psychologically disturbed as a result of lack of social support and extension of contract beyond the agreed contractual term with exhausting workload onboard with little or no support from the management who are more concerned about contract execution than the welfare of the crew onboard. However, it was recommended that living and working conditions of Nigerian seafarers onboard in this pandemic era should be given utmost attention by applying practical and pragmatic approach on issues bordering on facilitation of crew change, resupply, repairs, survey and certification and licensing of seafarers.

Keywords: COVID-19, seafarers, welfare, pandemic.

1. Introduction

The world economy has been plunged into a resounding jeopardy as a result of coronavirus diseases 2019(COVID-19) pandemic which as badly affected every sector of the economy at local, national and global level. COVID-19 pandemic influence seems to have no boundary and cut across all the continents and countries of the world with the attendant ability to arrive at unpredictable destination. On 11 march 2020 World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease 2019 a pandemic (WHO, 2020).

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By way of introduction, Corona viruses are a large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). A novel coronavirus (COV) is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans, but now discovered as an infectious agent found in virtually all life forms, including humans, animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria. Viruses consist of genetic material—either deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) or ribonucleic acid (RNA)—surrounded by a protective coating of protein, called a capsid, with or without an outer lipid envelope. They often damage or kill the cells that they infect, causing disease in infected organisms.

The novel SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that emerged in the city of Wuhan, China, 2019 and has since caused a large scale COVID-19 epidemic and spread to virtually over one hundred and eighty-eight countries. On December 31, 2019 Chinese authorities alerted the WHO of an outbreak of a novel strain of coronavirus causing severe illness, which was subsequently named SARS-CoV-2. As of February 20, 2020, nearly 167,500 COVID-19 cases have been documented, although many more mild cases have likely gone undiagnosed. Today not fewer than five million cases and over three hundred deaths has been reported.

According to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (2020), the first coronavirus case was confirmed on 27 February, 2020 in Lagos state by the Virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital. The infected individual who arrived in the country on 25 February from Milan, Italy who showed symptoms of the virus was quarantined at the Lagos State Biosecurity Facilities in which samples were taken for testing and was treated at the Infectious Disease Hospital in Yaba, Lagos.

COVID – 19 pandemic has brought about unseemly predictable standstill to the world economy, sea, air and land borders have been shutdown to wait for the medical intervention. Addressing the effects of COVID – 19 on the Nigerian Seafarers, this study examined mental health, psychological and the pecuniary outcomes among seafarers in loading and unloading of cargoes from countries with COVID-19 by quantifying the magnitude of fear of transmission, symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and distress associated with these symptoms. Beyond the tragic health hazards of COVID-19 pandemic, the economic uncertainties, strangulations and disruptions that have by effect come at a significant cost to the global economy calls for serious concern. The slowdown in the global economy and lockdown in almost all major economic power houses of the world such as US, UK, China and Nigeria has taken its negative toll on the global demand for oil and services. To such an extent, discretionary spending by consumers continue to decline, cruise companies, tourism and hospitality industry are facing declining demand and patronage. This pandemic is placing up to a huge jobs losses and the maritime industry is not really exempted from the hit. It must be clearly noted that vessels movement restriction and contracts cancellations are expected to continue.

2. Examining the effects of Covid-19 on the global economy

COVID-19 outbreak is an economic woe to the global market and economy. Its effect spread like a wild fire and has left businesses around the world counting their costs. The economic impact of the virus can be examined ranging from the following order:

2.1. Collapse of stock markets

Huge alterations in stock markets, has negatively affected the value of individual savings accounts. The FTSE, Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nikkei have all seen huge falls since the outbreak began on 31 December. The Dow and the FTSE have their biggest drops in the first three months of the year since 33 years ago. Investors withheld their capital for fear of the ravaging effect of COVID-19 pandemic. This has a devastating consequences that will jeopardize economic growth with the attendant fear that the international communities' actions may not be enough to stop the deterioration. In response, central banks in many countries, including the United States of America, United Kingdom, and Nigeria slashed interest rates to encourage food security. That should, in theory, make borrowing cheaper and encourage spending to temporally boost the economy but the extent in which this measure can yield favorable and expected result in developing countries such as Nigeria is a serious source of concern.

2.2. Increase in the rate of unemployment

Jones et al (2020) reported that in the United States, the number of people filing for unemployment hit a record high, indicating an end to a decade of expansion for one of the world's largest economies. Approximately one million people in the United Kingdom applied for benefits in just two weeks at the end of March. Over one hundred and fifty million Nigerians agitating for substantial palliatives to help assuage the effect of hunger while fighting COVID-19 pandemic. Some banks and other organizations in Nigeria have reduced their staff strength in order to ameliorate the effect of the pandemic on the operational cost of their organizations caused as a result the lockdown of the economy imposed by government at federal and state level to curtail the spread of the virus. Also, it must be noted that the spread of COVID-19 poses a big threat to people working in informal sector and small businesses which serve as major source of livelihood for many Africans especially Nigerians.

2.3. Crashed oil prices

Nigeria is oil-driven economy, and the global demand for petroleum based products has all but dried up as lockdowns across the world have kept people inside and factories shut down. The crude oil price had already been affected by a row between OPEC, the group of oil producers, and Russia. COVID-19 pandemic has also driven the price down further. Brent crude is the benchmark used by Europe and the rest of the world. Its price dipped below \$20, to the lowest level seen in 18 years and turned negative for the first time in history. Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) have reached a compromise to cut production, hence COVID-19 pandemic pin pointedly x-raying a red light to global economic compression and strangulation.

2.4. Collapse of economic activities

Economic recession is a decline in commercial activity. If the economy is growing, that generally means more wealth and more new jobs. This is measured by considering the percentage change in gross domestic product, or the value of goods and services produced, within a space of one year. International Monetary Fund (IMF) postulated that the global economy will shrink by 3% this year. The IMF described the decline as the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although it is said that the coronavirus has plunged the world into a "crisis like no other", it does expect global growth to rise to 5.8% next year if the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020, (Jones et al ,2020).

2.5. Technological upheaval

Nigerian Government has mandated all government parastatal including educational sector to embark on virtual learning and Governments around the world have urged employees to work from home where possible. Shares in technology companies such as Zoom have economic upturn at the moment as more people and big organizations depend on video conferencing and email to hold meetings or get tasks done, lecturers and teachers teach their students via zoom meeting, Google classroom, classdojo to mentioned a few. The demand for online shopping and entertainment has also soared as people stay indoors. Amazon's share price has hit new highs, while streaming platform Netflix was at one point a more valuable company than oil giant ExxonMobil (Jones et al 2020).

2.6. Transportation sector

Maritime, aviation and land transportation modes have not a little loss to share as sea and air ports are shut down, and land borders closed. The industry has been badly damaged, with airlines cutting flights and customers cancelling business trips and holidays. Governments around the world have introduced travel restrictions to try to contain the virus. The EU banned travelers from outside the bloc for over 30 days in an unprecedented move to seal its borders because of the coronavirus crisis in March. In the US, the Trump administration has banned travelers from European airports from entering the US. Data from the flight and vessel tracking service Radar shows that the number of flights and vessels globally has taken a huge hit. Berti (2020) stated that horrendous effects of corona virus on

shipping industry is as a result of its relationship with China. China is said to be the driver of the shipping industry as a lot of countries around the world are dependents on Chinese demand and Chinese exports in respect to raw material and finished goods.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on Nigeria maritime industry

One of the greatest modes of moving trade in quantum, economically and safely, around the world remains via maritime transportation and expanding up to 90% in the world economy. The federal government earlier this year plan to spawn the sum of N2trillion from the maritime industry. Today this mission is automatically rendered mission impossible by the reason of the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic. There has been a decline in the volume of import and export cargoes. Major ports of the world have been shut down and the global economy seems to be wallowing under economic convulsion.

Not before long, the financial analysts around the world have predicted that there would be a match up drop in government revenue as federal agencies such as the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency(NIMASA), Nigerian Ports Authority(NPA), Standards Organization of Nigeria, the Nigerian Agency for Food Drug Administration and Control, Nigerian Agriculture Quarantine Services to mention a few agencies shouldered the responsibility of revenue generation from authorizing release of cargoes in port, would also lose significant revenue (Hellenic shipping news, 2020),

The Nigerian Customs Service as part of the few government agencies with a revenue generation mandate aiming at N2 trillion due to it 2019 record who exceeded its target of N937 billion by N404 billion and NPA had N118 billion in seven months in 2018. NIMASA in 2018 contributed a total of N22 billion to the Federation Account, will face it hit of decline expectations as COVID-19 pandemic continues it bites against the nations of the world and sea ports remain access restricted (Hellenic shipping news, 2020).

Devoid of any prevarication or vagueness, Nigeria's maritime sector, the seaports remain the lifeblood and economic gate way of the nation. Nigerian Custom Service and all other federal revenue generating agencies largely depends on the sea ports. In 2019, Nigeria's imports from China alone was N4.3trillion, 25 percent of total imports around the world, while imported manufactured goods took up about 70 percent of total imports. On a serious note the possibility of repeating same financial record this year is automatically not feasible as China and the rest of the world have resorted to shut down factories, imposing sanctions and restrictions on vessels as the world struggle to limit the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

The effect of COVID-19 as postulated by the experts could put more pressure on inflation as the cost of local production goes up. Nigeria, like all other nations of the world, is sailing in era or season of economic uncertainty, and its weaknesses or defenselessness to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic distress and numbness can be attributed to heavy dependency on global economies for fiscal revenues.

3.1. Effect of Covid-19 on port operations

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) issued a circular, recommending flag state authorities, port state authorities and control administration, companies and shipmasters to co-operate in order to ensure that, where appropriate, passengers can embark and disembark, cargo operations can occur, ships can enter and depart shipyards for repair and survey, stores and supplies can be loaded, certificates can be issued and crews can be exchanged, with minimal disruptions. Succinctly, the application and or putting into action of various restrictions imposed by national and sub-sovereign authorities affecting shipping and port operation activities, as well as other regulatory measures around the globe, are making it challenging for stakeholders in the shipping industry to fulfill their contractual obligations. Also, shortages of dock workers are being experienced in Nigeria ports as a result of the fear of contacting the disease. Although, the ports are not closed but shortages of dockworkers have hindered effective and efficient of port operations.

3.2. Panic buying of food stuff and logistics services

COVID-19 pandemic has become main factor responsible to the current spike in the cost of food stuff and transport cost in the country and devaluation naira. With many parts of the world exploring

total lockdown to contain the Coronavirus pandemic, the rising cost of food stuff and other essential items got their spike on daily basis, as the organized private sector explores opportunity to reduce the impact the global crisis might likely have on the scuffling domestic economy. This also imposes a huge challenge to the chandlers making supplies to ships. The cost of protective equipment such as face mask and sanitizers became special commodities and difficult to find.

4. Overview of the effect of COVID-19 on seafarers

Significantly, competent seafarers have always been distinct and well defined people who have good direction-finding, and or course-plotting, with engineering skills. In realities there are complexities of life at sea. Seafaring as a career, presents many challenges. Crewmembers not only work with each other but, when they complete their work, they have to live in the same social environment as their work-mates (Smith, 2016). For all intent and purpose, man is not able to survive at sea and yet inseparably attached to the shore for his every need. The agenda is consequently twins in nature, both taking into consideration that seafarers suffer from isolation, yet they are not isolated in their experiences, feelings, emotions and ideas. While seafarers' unique environment separates them from others. Thus not only will the uniqueness of their environment influence a new conceptual framework, but also the everyday humanness of them having ideas, feelings, emotions, needs and values.

According to Smith (2016), the exploitation of seafarers has always existed, but now it has become more common and frequent. The stranded seafarers both on board and ashore have not been paid strand benefits by the Ship-owners. In addition, ship-owners can cut costs in various ways, but the easiest way to achieve are those at the expense of labor costs, in particular costs for maintaining proper living conditions on board the ship.

5. The effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on Nigerian seafarers

Seafarers are in the high risk group of exposing themselves to Covid-19 and it is much more likely for them to infect others. However, effects of covid-19 pandemic on Nigerian seafarers are as follow:

5.1. Stranded and marooned

Beyond the tragic health hazards and human consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic uncertainties, and disruptions as aftermath come at a significant cost to the global economy. Nigerian seafarers are not left behind the scene. The effects of the lockdowns are visible on Nigerian Seafarers as many countries of the world capitals and sea routs have been put under strict lockdown and many Nigerian seafarers are right now in most of those countries stranded, marooned, deserted, abandoned, isolated, stuck, forsaken, frustrated, left and put in difficult and helpless positions around the world as a result of COVID-19 lockdown without any means of getting home to unite with their families and worse still, the ship-owners are not ready for any kind of stranded benefits. There are perhaps no set of workers more isolated in a pandemic than seafarers. Nations have been closing their borders and crew changes have been delayed for long periods, perhaps indefinitely (Seafarers happiness index, 2020).

5.2. No crew change or mid sea reliever

As at the date of this publication, no crew change at mid sea/ or reliever plan and nothing seem to be done to let the crew members who have been aboard before the global shutdown to proceed on their statutory leave or free gangway where sea ports are not shut down to allow the crew members who gone ashore to return as relievers aboard.

Owolabi and George (2020) reported that Nigeria has shut international airports, closed all land borders and imposed curbs on cargo vessels allowed to dock at its ports in an effort to contain the outbreak. Has anybody asked a question about the whereabouts of the Nigerian seafarers on board those vessels denied passage? According to seafarers' happiness index (2020) the trend for crew changes being delayed or postponed has meant that many feel forced to serve beyond their contract period, and are now even being asked to renew their contracts to avoid censure.

5.3. Mental and psychological effects

The state of living and working in fear onboard and even paranoia is creeping in as the seafarers have to deal with observing safety precautionary measures against the virus, sanitizing and living under constant fear of infections couple with their normal cargo operation are issues of serious concern as it affects their mental and psychological stability. The complexity of living and working onboard is unique and not comparable with working environment ashore (Oldenburg and Jensen, 2020). This more attention must be paid to living and working condition of seafarers onboard especially in this pandemic era.

According to the seafarers Happiness index (2020) the feelings that enough is not been done to ensure safety of those onboard, feelings of being physically- exhausted, mentally disturbed, home sick and anxious which is having negative effect on their psychic are been reported by the seafarers. It must be noted that Nigerian seafarers just like the rest other nationalities are also going through these precarious conditions.

5.4. Lack of social support hence stress

Stress influences mental health as well as physical health. Nigerian seafarers experience a high level of stress for a long time—and are coping poorly with this stress—may become irritable, socially withdrawn, and emotionally unstable. Nigerian seafarers are also faced with difficulty concentrating and solving problems. This is capable of exposing the seafarers to intense and prolonged stress and start to suffer from extreme anxiety, depression, or other severe emotional problems. Anxiety disorders caused by stress may include generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Just like soldiers who survived war catastrophes sometimes develop an anxiety disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder. They re-experience the traumatic event again and again in dreams and in disturbing memories or flashbacks during the day.

Social Support from family members, friends, and others who care for the seafarers supposed to be sources of good health and goes a long way in helping them to get by in times of trouble as COVID-19 pandemic. Social support systems provide seafarers with emotional sustenance, tangible resources and aid, and information when they are in need. People with social support feel cared about and valued by others and feel a sense of belonging to a larger social network, but far from the Nigerian seafarers. Those who are due to proceed on free gangway are denied and worse still no social support. According to Auerbach and Gramling (2009) a large body of research has linked social support to good health and a superior ability to cope with stress.

5.5. Decrease in Immune response

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigerian seafarers aboard have barely gone ashore to see their families and loved ones. Ordinarily the immune system is a marvel of precision. It protects the body from disease by seeking out and destroying foreign invaders, such as viruses and bacteria. But there is substantial evidence that stress suppresses the activity of the immune system, leaving the seafarers more susceptible to COVID-19 infection.

A study was embarked on board ship to assess an Individual stress levels among seafarers and the results were amazing. Separation from their family accounted for 48%, pressure at work 30%, long working days 28%, heat in workplaces 24%, these were regarded as the most important sources of stress aboard. However, refusing crew change or mid sea reliever is not a healthy practice in the life of seafarers (Oldenburg and Jensen 2019).

6. Measures taken to reduce effects of COVID- 19

The Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) has extended the validity of Statutory and Trading certificates for all Nigerian Registered vessels. These include Standards of Training, Certification and Watch keeping (STCW) certificates for seafarers issued by the Agency, safety certificates, certificates of medical fitness and other statutory and trading certificates related to SOLAS'74 as amended MARPOL 73/78 as amended, National Requirements for Power Driven Small

Crafts(PDSC), Certificates of ship registry and Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 as amended and will be applicable to all Nigerian flagged vessels and seafarers sailing onboard Nigerian flagged vessels as well as onboard foreign flagged vessels (Esenyel Partners, 2020). These measures are taken to ameliorate the difficulties seafarers are confronted with and the need to keep them in job beyond the pandemic and to ensure uninterrupted shipping.

Eromosele (2020) stated that Nigeria Port Authority (NPA) suspends fees, as one of the measures employed in reducing the effect of COVID-19. Apart from the diversion of vessels from Asia, the NPA in line with global best practice directed all terminal operators to suspend all applicable terminal storage fees on consignments, such as demurrage for an initial period of 21 days. This gesture by NPA was in recognition of the pressure that COVID-19 pandemic imposes on businesses and the responsibility imposed on the authority to relieve this burden on its customers. The financial implications of these policies on the terminal operators will breed a downward shift in their operational charges to amend the situation of stakeholders.

7. Conclusion

This study examines in detail the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the shipping industry, focusing on problems concerning the port operations and working and living conditions of seafarers on board merchant ships. From the foregoing it could be seen that Covid-19 has greatly impacted on Nigerian shipping industry and the global shipping at large. There is no doubt that there will be global recession as a result of this pandemic that has affected every sector of the economy, however, early eradication of this virus and full opening of the economy by countries will help in recovering from this catastrophic event on time. Exploring the available materials on maritime policy making on a global and of the national (NIMASA and NPA) level, the authors focus on seafarers' rights in view of international enforcement mechanisms and particularly taking into account of the recent ILO Maritime Labor Convention. Although, Nigeria has put some measures in place to reduce the effect of the lockdown on ports and port users but much has not been done in respect to the welfare of seafarers. It must be noted that the COVID-19 situation is leaving seafarers feeling trapped and this appears to be exacerbating existing social frictions associated with mixed nationality crews (Seafarers Happiness index, 2020). The current situation has shown that there are serious challenges when it comes to keeping people happy, entertained, and stimulated. Therefore, there is a great need for effective enforcement mechanisms in this area and at this particular time to ensure safe crew changes and facilitate crew changes throughout this pandemic era where the seafarers are being over used onboard, refusing to allow those on board proceed on leave and allowing those ashore return. Lastly, IMO (2020) recommendation on the health and welfare of the seafarers in respect to the application of practical and pragmatic approach on issues bordering on crew changeovers, resupply, repairs, survey and certification and licensing of seafarers should be given urgent attention.

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